Mature female learners activating agency after completion of an education foundation degree: Professional progression and the teacher shortage crisis.

Helen Bovill[a] Neil Harrison[b] Hilary Smith[c] Viki Bennett[c] Liz McKenzie[d]

[a]University of the West of England, [b]University of Oxford, [c]Bath Spa University, [d]Plymouth University

Abstract

This paper draws upon questionnaire data from 126 mature, female alumni students and interviews with a sub set of 20 participants who completed education foundation degrees in three English universities in the South West. Three illustrative cases from interviews are chosen representing three models of progression: 'success', 'version of success', and 'still struggling to get on'. This paper uses three dimensions of agency: iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative within an ecological model exploring the interplay of agency, structure and context. Figured worlds theory helps in understanding impact of actor's histories upon projections and practical actions. Teacher shortages and the potential untapped resource of teaching assistants is explored. Pathways toward teaching can act as affordances or constraints in teaching assistants' trajectories. Affordances are identified as open, transparent, accessible routes to teaching, and under and post-graduate provision, which provides conducive circumstances through reflective engagement. This may interrupt habitual ways of thinking and risk aversion leading to expansive future projections and expectation maintenance. Ecological agency allows clearer understandings that activation of agency not only resides in individuals but in the context and circumstances they experience. Figured worlds gives insight into recruitment and entry into emerging social spaces and the importance of recognition.

Keywords

Author contact details:

Corresponding Author:

Helen Bovill, helen2.bovill@uwe.ac.uk

Other authors:

Neil Harrison, neil.harrison@education.ox.ac.uk

Hilary Smith, h.smith2@bathspa.ac.uk

Viki Bennett, v.bennett@bathspa.ac.uk

Liz McKenzie, liz.mckenzie@plymouth.ac.uk

Introduction

Foundation Degrees (FDs) were introduced in the UK in 2000. Taking two years of full-time study, FDs were designed for those in employment and seeking career development, but who lacked traditional university entry qualifications (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2000). Alongside, universities were tasked to offer top up degrees to full honours status, potentially leading to enhanced professional prospects. One common FD in the UK has been in 'education support' aimed primarily at teaching assistants (TAs) or education support assistants (hereafter referred to as TAs collectively) seeking to become teachers or other education professionals. These courses have tended to recruit women from lower

socio-economic groups, they are often mature learners who unexpectedly find themselves at university and who have mostly had fractured and challenging experiences within their own personal and educational journeys. The *Transforming Lives* project, reported here, aimed to capture and explore stories of women who have completed FDs in educational support at three post-92[1] English universities in the South West. It sought to understand more clearly their motivations, journeys and expectations into, within and out of higher education (HE). Women are the focus of the study because the majority of students on the education support programmes were women, as were the majority of the study responses, we were not looking to compare experiences of men and women, and the few men who replied to the study did not provide a meaningful basis for comparison. The research aimed to explore which participants had progressed professionally to become teachers or other educational professionals and why some participants chose not to, or struggled to progress professionally after completing their studies. The impact of agency or 'the capacity to act' (Priestley 2015, 1) seemed to be operationalised in different ways by the participants of the study. An ecological model of agency has been used to further understand three illustrative cases and to explore to what extent agency shapes their trajectories. The three illustrative cases from interview data are chosen to represent three models of progression within the whole study: 'success', 'version of success', and 'still struggling to get on'. An ecological model of agency is useful in understanding the interplay of an individual's capacity to act, with the structures and contexts in which they are enabled or constrained. Figured worlds theory lends a further layering to this in that it allows deeper exploration of the impact of

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[1] Post-92 University refers to former polytechnics or colleges of higher education which were granted university status when the sector expanded in the UK in 1992.

participants' histories on present and future actions. It also allows for exploration of recruitment and entry into new social spaces and the role that recognition (self and others) plays. This paper combines exploration of agency within a wider context of teacher shortages in the UK. TAs could be viewed as an untapped resource in relation to this shortage and routes into teaching could be seen as a conducive circumstance or affordance enabling professional progression through activation of agency. The following questions guide this paper:

1. How did TAs activate their agency during their studies?

2. How were TAs institutionally supported to activate agency in their studies?

3. To what extent does activation of agency impact on their professional development?

4. How might TAs be supported to use their agency to contribute a partial solution to the teacher recruitment crisis?

An ecological model of agency and a figured worlds lens

An ecological model of agency explores how people relate to one another within context and within time and space. It seeks to combine the impact of structure and agency and introduce a temporal element. Priestley (2015) Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) and Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2017) utilise the ecological approach in understanding the potential impact of agency which introduces 'person environment interactions' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 36). Agency is 'not something that people have or possess' (Priestley 2015, 1) it is an emergent property which can be cultivated given conducive circumstances. Priestley et al (2015) highlight that agency remains an elusive concept despite extensive

theorisation, and in particular the ways in which teachers enact agency remains little understood. This applies also to the ways in which TAs enact agency.

Priestley et al (2015) also consider the capacity of individuals and the spaces in which they operate activation of agency to be inter-connected. They use Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) three dimensions to illustrate this. The first dimension is the iterational and this includes personal capacity, beliefs and values and relates to personal and professional histories. The second is the projective dimension, which encompasses short and long-term goals, guided by aspirations and expectations. The third is the practical-evaluative dimension where translation of goals into action may occur; cultural, structural and material factors influence this. These dimensions are interconnected; actors can move between and within dimensions, they are not linear or deterministic. For example, within the iterational dimension, individuals may have a tendency to act from habit. This might lead to narrow 'repertoires of expansion' (Priestley et al 2015). However, repetition of less helpful past actions through contact with enabling cultural, structural or material factors can occur. Individuals can be supported to engage in 'expectation maintenance' (ibid 2015) through education programmes seeking to interrupt habitual and socially re-enforced ways of thinking. They can be motivated through encouragement, positive or negative experiences, resilience building, role modelling and reflection so that repertoire of options is expansive rather than restrictive. Links with 'the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past' (Priestley et al 2015, 5) can be made. Translation of an expanded repertoire into action also depends on context and on temporality. Relational aspects between previous negative experiences can narrow projections and can lead to being risk averse;

alternatively, they can galvanise another actor to activate agency in a way that brings about change and desired progress. Within all dimensions, actors make judgements about the range of possibilities open to them and the likelihood of success. They will weigh up the affordances and constraints of particular courses of action and cultural, social and material aspects inform this. Actors may move and shift between dimensions and progress forwards or regress backwords in desired progress, and progress or expectations may change. Actors encouraged to build resilience and engage in expectation maintenance are more likely to be 'resource-equipped' actors (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005) able to cope with tension and shift. Emirbayer and Mische (ibid, 1004) consider 'there are no concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentically with structuring environments.' They ask what contexts keep actors engaged in experiences of the past and in habitual responses that might not be as useful to them in future orientations? How might they be enabled to gain 'imaginative distance from those responses' (ibid, 1006) in order to formulate alternative futures? Activation of agency is neither linear, nor dualistic; contexts can be both facilitating and constraining, and experienced differently by different actors. Activation of agency may depend on access to resource building such as:

- multiple networks to draw from personally and/or professionally

- creative encouragement

- spaces for reflection

- constructive criticism

- freedom to try out new roles

- clearly defined pathways toward change.

These conditions may help to maximise 'resource-equipped' actors to engage in 'expectation maintenance' to move forward even in the face of less positive

circumstances, or to try again when things have not gone as planned. They may potentially be more able to 'loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1110).

Activation of agency is impacted by past and present experiences of actors. The lens of 'figured worlds' theory can support a clearer understanding of this through exploring concepts of recruitment and entry into given social spaces, mediated through interaction. Figured worlds is a concept developed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) and Holland and Lave (2001). They describe figured worlds as having four characteristics: cultural, contextual, social and distributive. People enter given social spaces, 'figured worlds', and act in these social spaces in ways related to personal histories. Entry to figured worlds is complex. Hierarchy and closure (or self-closure) may mean we never enter some. Others we remain on the periphery of or have only temporary access to, whilst some we learn to fully inhabit. This can be related to external structural forces, to power and prestige, or to feelings about who we 'figure ourselves out to be' within these spaces. The university and workplace are figured worlds that inter-relate. They have sub-sets of social spaces where individuals might feel entry is closed, or that they are periphery or full participants. Holland et al (1998) describe these spaces as cultural resources, and as 'sites of possibility'. Individuals improvise and innovate activating agency to adhere to or move away from particular scripts of their lives. 'In figured worlds people learn to recognize each other as a particular sort of actor' (Urrieta 2007, 108). Entry into other figured worlds are interdependent on processes of recognition and acceptance by self and others.

Teacher shortages and TAs as an untapped resource

This paper focusses on the extent TAs activate agency to achieve professional goals of becoming teachers or other educational professionals. The ecological model of agency identifies activation of agency as 'enacted in a concrete situation, therefore both being constrained and supported by cultural, structural and material resources available to actors' (Priestley et al 2015, 4). Currently the UK has a recruitment and retention crisis in teaching. This could be an opportunity to foster conducive circumstances for TAs, who wish to do so, to become qualified teachers. For this to occur TAs may benefit from a personal belief in their capacity to achieve this (iterational), short and long-term goals (projective), and the cultural, structural and material circumstances (practical-evaluative) conducive to this. This may position them as 'resource-equipped' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) for 'expectation maintenance' (Priestley et al 2015). For example, security that they can financially support themselves whilst working toward this, clear under and post graduate pathways through to their goals and professionally and educationally supportive environments. Recruitment and entry into given social spaces necessary to train to be a teacher can have links to the extent to which TAs recognise themselves as potential teachers. The extent to which they feel recognised in new social spaces where they are 'figuring out' who they are may also be key (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001; Urrietta 2007).

The National Union of Teacher's (NUT) conference 2016 highlighted the teacher shortage crisis:

> Teaching recruitment and retention are both at dangerously low levels, with many schools unable to fill vacant posts with suitably qualified candidates. Increasing numbers are also leaving the profession. Last year saw the highest number of resignations for a decade. NUT surveys of primary, secondary and leadership members show that the

majority of teachers are considering leaving the profession in the next two years. This is a desperately serious situation. (National Education Union 2016, 1).

Understanding reasons for the crisis is complex, encompassing many factors such as: numbers of pupils increasing (demand), tuition fees rising (supply), graduates finding more lucrative jobs, routes to teaching have changed, heavy workload and changes in policy (See and Gorard 2019; Worth, Lazzari and Hillary 2017). School Direct[2] routes (for example) have struggled to reach their quotas (National Audit Office 2016). Stress and an accountability culture are also factors. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) states: 'recruiting and retaining enough teachers to serve growing numbers of pupils is one of the key challenges currently facing England's education system' (Worth et al 2017, 3).

A recent Teaching Assistant and Support Staff Survey (2017) noted 'nearly a third of teaching assistants have a degree and are interested in qualifying as a teacher' (Bloom 2017, 1). There are more than 122,000 (ibid.) candidates in England and Wales who could qualify as teachers through various post-graduate routes such as: Post-Graduate Certificate of Education[3] (PGCE), School Direct, Post-graduate teaching apprenticeships[4] or Teach First[5]. Deputy General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 1) union said:

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[2] School Direct can be a salaried or unsalaried one year post-graduate route to becoming a qualified teacher in England and Wales, which is run by a partnership between a lead school and an accredited teacher training provider.

[3] PGCE Post-Graduate Certificate of Education is a (usually) one year unsalaried university based route into teaching in the UK.

[4] Post-graduate teaching apprenticeships are new programmes developed for post-graduates in England and Wales which are one year post-graduate routes to teaching which combine classroom teaching, learning and a salary.

[5] Teach First is a charity led two year salaried post-graduate route to teaching in England and Wales which works with partnership schools, business and universities with the aim of placing qualified candidates in schools in low-income areas.

> Becoming a qualified teacher after working as a teaching assistant was "a route that is proven to succeed. Many schools have grown their own talent in this way…Those who have prior experience in schools are likely to stay longer, as they are fully aware of what is involved." He added: "Though it does require flexibility on the part of the school to enable teaching assistants – who often have ongoing financial and family responsibilities – to gain their teaching qualification while continuing to work.

For TAs without a degree FDs are a potential way to continue to work whilst gaining necessary qualifications. They were designed to offer 'routes to higher qualified jobs through vocational pathways of study' (Bovill 2012, 689) and equip 'people with skills for tomorrow's jobs' (HEFCE 2000, 5). Fds may offer flexibility, and provide conducive circumstances to access qualifications and activate agency with 'intentionality, forethought, self-directedness, and self-efficacy (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 36). Harvey (2009) note the potential for FDs to contribute to widening participation and to attract groups that would otherwise not participate in HE. TAs are a key demographic more likely to be attracted to under-graduate provision like FDs that allows: lower tariff on entry due to wide work experience, the ability to continue to work and study and earn a salary, and the potential to study on particular days of the week (conducive circumstances).

Additionally, programmes aimed at enabling environments, which foster conducive circumstances for TAs to become teachers need to engage with breaking down barriers, which might lead to wariness or lack of desire to become a teacher. Dunne, Goddard and Woolhouse (2008, 239) in their work with FD students note 'a level of disillusionment regarding notions of…becoming a teacher'. They found elements of guilt, sacrifice and family pressures, alongside knowledge of what the job was like; as reasons for not wanting to teach. Worth et al (2017, 39) draw attention to a need to more fully understand teachers 'journeys in and out of the profession' related to:

'personal and family circumstances, job satisfaction and life events'. This is also true of TAs if they are to be viewed as a potential untapped resource for the teacher shortage.

Research design

The *Transforming Lives* research centres on TA graduates at three post-92 English universities in the South West. The target population was all the students who had completed the FD in education support since early 2000 to the present. The study utilised mixed methods of open and closed questionnaires followed by semi-structured one to one interviews. Mixed methodology gained contextual quantitative data via questionnaires identifying trends in professional pathways, for example what number of participants were now teachers. The questionnaires helped to refocus the interview guides for the qualitative data, to 'adequately reflect the range of what we were trying to find out' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 415). Qualitative data was collected from a smaller sample to gain rich data to explore nuances identified within trends. 'Paradigm wars' (Gage, 1989) have given way to a more pragmatic view which recognises the value of different approaches to answer varying aspects of questions within a research design (Gorard and Smith 2006; Denzin 2008). Challenges of mixed methodology are that it can lack rigour of either paradigm. We have attempted to overcome this critique through prioritising one method (qualitative interviews resulting in illustrative cases) as the dominant framework, with the quantitative method (questionnaires) supporting in a subordinate way (Wilkinson and Staley 2017). A largely inductive approach was applied with no initial hypothesis generated, though the research team remain aware that all research is informed by

own perceptions and experiences which require constant reflection and that movement toward deduction occurs as the research progresses (Wilkinson and Staley 2017) .

585 questionnaires were sent out electronically to all alumni students we had contact details for. Total number of responses were 126 representing a 22% response rate. Nearly all respondents were female, representative of the overall student population. The few male responses were taken out of the sample as it was viewed there were too few to analyse meaningfully as a separate group and gender influences upon activation of agency is not a focus of this paper . The majority of replies were from women within the 30-44 or 45-59 age range. Ethnicity was majority white British, with Black African (3.1%), Black Caribbean (1.6%) and Pakistani (2%) making up the remainder of replies, representative of overall demographics of the FD.

Semi-structured interviews lasting up to one hour were conducted with 20 respondents. These were sampled through a convenience model of those who agreed to be contacted further and could be tracked down. As experienced by Woodhouse and Pedder (2017) access to potential respondents was impacted by busy lives and interviews were sometimes cancelled or rescheduled. This impacted on who was part of the study and presented issues of generalisability in the illustrative cases. Though this is not a primary concern of a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 156) the illustrative cases in this paper were chosen as they represent a form of generalisability to the whole cohort. Sometimes termed 'fuzzy' generalisations, this allows for uncertainty, where '*x* may produce *y*'

but not always (Bassey, in Hammersley 2001, 219). Each interview was audio recorded. A research assistant (RA) carried out the interviews as it was decided by the research team that close relationships with students might lead to less valid data through social desirability or confirmation bias.

Interview data was analysed by the whole research team encompassing the three separate universities. Thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). Each member of the team initially read through all the transcripts and made initial notes on what they considered to be repeating themes. This was accomplished through separate close reading of the interviews involving a 'constant comparison' (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of interview data. After this initial close reading, a first developmental meeting took place to discuss potential themes. We cross-compared our initial findings, from colour coded transcripts, into relevant potential themes that each researcher had identified separately. Three overarching themes were agreed upon at this meeting as having strong re-occurrence in the data: complex post-graduate professional development (represented in this paper), students as change agents, and liminality processes between teacher and TA. Following the initial meeting, each member of the team took responsibility for a specific theme and read all the transcripts for this theme, further colour coding instances in the data. In the questionnaires, consideration of the whole population occurred to present statistical trends in professional trajectories. Biographical analysis of each interview (Biesta 2008, 17) resulted in choosing three illustrative cases representing three models of professional progression seen as relevant to the whole interview cohort: 'success', 'version of success', and 'still struggling to get on'.

Illustrative case 1 – Rebecca – 'shop assistant to college/university lecturer' represents a 'success' story of linear, supported professional progression with a positive impact upon the participant. Though Rebecca's case is not a school-based case, it is chosen because it exemplifies a model that could be emulated.

Illustrative case 2 – Mandy – 'TA to teacher' represents a 'version of success' story with a less linear and less supported professional progression, still with a largely positive impact upon the participant.

Illustrative case 3 – Fiona – 'beautician and TA' represents a 'still struggling to get on' story of both 'success' and 'failure' and an unsupported, stalled professional progression with both positive and negative impacts upon the participant.

Ethical principles of the three universities informed the study, alongside BERA (2014). Information sheets accompanied questionnaires and students were free to choose whether to respond. Questionnaire respondents had choice of anonymity, as contact details were optional. Those that agreed to interview signed a further information sheet and consent form detailing the research and their rights. At the point of interview, the RA went over the detail of these forms once again with each participant before asking if it was still ok to proceed. All data was stored on computers, which were password protected.

Pseudonyms are used, and non-essential data changed or omitted to help manage anonymity. This is particularly relevant here as the paper discusses three lives in detail and consequences of self-recognition or recognition by others is much higher. We rejected respondent validation of themes in this instance as the three illustrative

cases were pivotal and only the research team had the benefit of the context of the whole cohort. When doing this, care needs to be taken so that it does not change the truth of the story or impact upon validity (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011).

Cohort demographics

The 126 questionnaires were analysed for (1) job role before commencing the FD (2) job role after completing the FD/top-up (3) further training since completing the FD/ top-up. This was to gain an understanding of the overall picture of professional progression for the whole cohort, represented in Table 1–3 below. Please note that 90.5% of questionnaire respondents progressed to and completed a BA top-up after the FD so in most cases further training denotes training beyond the top-up. Table 2 demonstrates that 60 questionnaire respondents have made some sort of professional progression since completing the FD/top-up. Not all TAs undertake an FD to move out of work they are doing, many continue to want to work in the same role and community (Bovill 2012). Others still have family and work commitments, which take precedence. However, most students undertake HE study in the hope that increased opportunities and related increased remuneration will occur (Bovill 2017, 33). Table 3 demonstrates that 68 questionnaire respondents have undertaken some further training since completing the FD/top-up. There may be a correlation between students who undertake further training and activation of agency. Overall demographics begin to highlight nuances at play in decisions, pathways and opportunities for the activation of agency. The following section will examine particular trajectories of three illustrative cases which explore: a 'successful', supported linear professional progression; a 'version of success' in a more complex and less supported progression; and a 'still struggling to get on' stalled progression where support to progress has been problematic. These three illustrative cases are

generalisable to the models of professional progression seen in the overall interview data.

Table 1: Job role before commencing the Foundation Degree

Job role before commencing the Foundation Degree	Paid education support role	Voluntary unpaid education support role	Working outside of education	Not working
Questionnaire respondent numbers	109	3	13	1

Table 2: Job role after completing the Foundation Degree/top-up

Job role after completing the Foundation Degree/top-up	Out of education, or not working, or not possible to identify	No professional progression. i.e. same job or role level as before	Completing or about to start a programme of teacher education	Progressed to teaching	Another educational role denoting professional progression
Questionnaire respondent numbers	10	56	**5**	**31**	**24**

Table 3: Further training since completing the Foundation Degree/top-up

Further training since completing the Foundation Degree/top-up	No further training	Some further training
Questionnaire respondent numbers	58	**68**

Illustrative case 1: Rebecca – shop assistant to college/university lecturer – 'success' model

Rebecca offers strong evidence of a clear understanding of her figured worlds from the perspective of the college where she studied her FD and her workplace. Both sites were strongly integrated offering 'conducive circumstances' for 'subjective evaluation' of her life. They offered supportive social structures enabling her to activate agency with 'intentionality, forethought, self-directedness and self-efficacy' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 36). This case illustrates the strongest connection between the iterative, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions (Emirbayer and

Mische 1998) and demonstrate both a strong capacity to act and conducive spaces in which to do so (Priestley et al 2015).

Rebecca is a 45-year-old white British woman with three grown children and she identifies as non-disabled. She is the first in her family (FIF) to go to university. Her father was a plumber and her mother a cook. Before her studies, Rebecca was a shop assistant. When Rebecca's children were young, she began to volunteer at her children's school. She then began to look for new opportunities in the education sector and found out about a learning support course in a college:

> I did my Level 3 English and maths supporting students. I did a Level 4 continuing practice in Special Education. Because there wasn't a career path for somebody who wanted to specialise in support, you either did teaching or support and support was very minimal wage.

Even early on Rebecca is demonstrating intention to act and being self-directive, which relates to the iterative and projective dimensions of ecological agency. However, conducive circumstances or affordances are supporting her personal capacity to act in the practical-evaluative dimension, where cultural and structural aspects of ecological agency are in alignment (Priestley et al 2015). Demonstration of material alignment is also evident, as the college wanted to develop a FD to run alongside employment for the support workers in the college. Employment of new support workers was on the basis that they would study and work at the same time and be accordingly paid:

> So in college now, we use a specialist support model where the support workers we have working with people with any form of learning disability, will have the foundation degree and they're on a progression route of wages and everything, the same as lecturers. So within college, they're recognised as professionals'.

The development of the FD, the progression route, and the improved wages represent cultural, structural and material factors aligning in Rebecca's favour. Rebecca went on to become a member of the first cohort of this FD. She graduated First Class and began her PGCE straight away. Being able to begin her PGCE in a seamless flow after her studies is a further affordance or conducive circumstance.

Rebecca experienced strong support in her workplace where she now leads a programme of study:

I finished the degree and then I started to support the Programme Leader ……so I began shadowing for two years. Because I hadn't done teaching at Higher Education, it was a whole new experience. ….I began to do little bits of the module, so there might be a session, perhaps, when she couldn't make it, so she'd ask me if I would go in and teach that one session and so, slowly, I built up working alongside her to beginning to take over and then was given some modules for myself to run… so that actually I could move into that role and that's how I came to where I am today.

Rebecca's under and post-graduate learning experience exemplifies supportive structures which afford her 'conducive circumstances' to facilitate activating her agency. This exposed her to 'progressive increases in developmentally appropriate challenges' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 39). This enabled her sense of her professional self to flourish and her 'repertoire' of choices to be expansive rather than narrow (Priestley et al 2015). Viewed through a figured world lens (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001) the structures in place gradually allowed her to come to a strong sense of who she was becoming as a professional. The working relationship described with her Programme Leader, in the quote above, demonstrates what Urrieta (2007) calls a 'site of possibility' where Rebecca feels recognised and accepted as a developing professional. This recognition by others, enables her own self-belief so that she can practice her new role in a safe, supportive environment and come to self-recognise as a capable potential member of a teaching workforce. She was given support to 'fully inhabit' a new social space through both recognition and entry (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001). Throughout she was encouraged to become a resilient and 'resource-equipped' actor able to engage in 'expectation maintenance' (Priestley et al 2015). She had access to open and transparent supportive structures which gave her the 'imaginative distance' to alter her trajectory 'loosening' her from 'past actions' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Rebecca is now beginning to support new cohorts on the programme she leads:

> Within college, we have a large proportion of support workers come in…and then they begin to ask, "How did you get where you are?" you know, "What did you do? I'd love to do what you do and really specialise and know more knowledge" so I would say there is a large proportion of colleagues that you work with, that become friends, who've actually gone on and done the Foundation degree who maybe themselves at one point thought, "Oh, no, I couldn't do that".

This, in particular, illustrates the ecological model of agency explored by (Priestley 2015; Priestley et al 2015; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017). Rebecca is active in her intention to act across all three dimensions and structurally supported to do so. This is resulting in further transmission of ecological agency as Rebecca passes this on to the next cohort of students. Rebecca's personal understanding of the figured worlds of her students and her practical experience of having travelled through this course, uniquely positions her. Leading this course, she can embed cultural, structural and material factors to shape the programme of study to enable the development of strong 'resource-equipped' actors (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) beyond her leadership. One way she is doing this is to bring promising students on in the way she was, so that the programme can continue to benefit from an insider perspective and role modelling, even when she leaves leadership of the programme.

Though Rebecca's illustrative case takes place in a college rather than a school, it is an indicator of ways that under and post-graduate routes to teaching could be developed within schools to break down structural inhibitors to professional progression for TAs to become teachers.

Illustrative case 2: Mandy – TA to teacher – 'version of success' model

Mandy's case offers some understanding of her figured worlds (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001) from the university perspective. Weaker understanding of her figured worlds from the perspective of her workplace are evident, with less 'affordances' or 'conducive circumstances' in which to activate her agency (Priestley 2015; Priestley et al 2015; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017). Hers is an example of a much more complex web of intention to act, with structural drivers and inhibitors counter balancing agency. Most significant to Mandy's case study was a pivotal episode; a catalyst which necessitated or 'demanded' rapid development of her intention to act (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Exploring Mandy's more chaotic journey to 'success' offers the chance to consider more broadly the 'projective' and 'practical-evaluative' dimension of ecological agency, or 'the capacity of actors' to respond 'to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). Whilst some actors might resist a 'demand' to change and rely on established patters of past behaviour, others will be galvanised into projective action to 'imagine alternative futures for a problematic present' (ibid, 1006). Having to negotiate more complex relational settings can result in a heightened criticality, better communication skills and an ability to negotiate and compromise.

Mandy is a 47-year-old white British woman with four grown children and she declares as non-disabled. She is the FIF to go to university. Her father was a labourer and her mother a part-time cleaner. When her children were younger, she worked as a support worker in primary school, which is where she worked when she studied on the FD and BA top-up. She graduated with a 2:1 and immediately began

her salaried School Direct route to teaching in the same school. She is now a year four teacher at the same school. Like Rebecca, Mandy took one-step at a time in her learning, gaining relevant qualifications and then coming across the FD. A combination of 'intentionality', and incidental processes were at play here. Mandy is clear in the interview that a pivotal episode for her came at the beginning of her HE studies:

> When I first started the degree, I said to my husband, you know, I'm going to take this on and I'm going to need you to help me and I'm going to need you to support me because I can't be doing everything as well as this. "Oh, yeah, that's fine. That's absolutely fine, I'll support you". But, that was in September, when I started, and he left in the April.

For some, this major change could have heralded the end of their HE journey all together. Mandy discussed the impact this had on her:

> So, I was devastated for a couple of years but I don't know how I kept going, I don't seriously know how I … you know, kept up the momentum to drive to (name removed) and to work full-time and to… You know, I had four girls then.
> It hasn't been an easy journey. My husband leaving, losing my house, you know, the financial kind of strain.

For Mandy, it galvanised her into action, her need to keep her salary drove her onwards but was both facilitated and constrained by structural realities. Mandy returns to this throughout the interview stating that her need to keep her salary became very important for her and this theme runs throughout many of the other 20 interviews. She understands that a PGCE may have broadened her horizons or led to a more 'expansive repertoire' of choices (Priestley et al 2015) through wider school experience. She discusses why she did not consider a PGCE:

> Mandy: because then I would have had to have gone on for one of the two years to do the PGCE. So that, yeah, it would have taken longer. It would have taken more money.
> Interviewer: have you retained a salary while you've been doing the Schools Direct?
> Mandy: Yes.
> Interviewer: Which doing a PGCE, you wouldn't be able to keep that salary.
> Mandy: You wouldn't no. No absolutely not.

Interviewer: Was that quite important to you, to keep the salary?
Mandy: Yes.

Throughout the interview, Mandy particularly focusses on her workplace where she has been for 13 years, stating her struggle to get them to support her in her professional goals:

> 'I had to fight for it. I had to fight all the way, really. Even for the TA status because some schools sometimes don't think that it's… what's the word… they don't look at it in best regard...I've had to fight for that and then, again, to be accepted on to the Schools Direct, yeah. You know, I had to prove myself all the way. All the way through, really'.

Mandy has 'weighed up' the varying risks of her choices and her judgements are both practical and evaluative. Practically speaking Mandy is constrained by finance but she takes advantage of a structural affordance, the School Direct route. She has evaluated her context in that It was too risky to lose her salary and train to teach via a PGCE route. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasise that actor's life courses impact upon practical action (iterative dimension) which in turn affects goals (projective dimension) and 'expectation maintenance'. However, the material aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension cannot be underestimated as transforming agency into action is always 'material, in that agency is partly shaped by the availability of physical resources and the nature of physical constraints' (Priestley et al 2015, 7).

Although Mandy did negotiate a School Direct place with her school, she says it was 'a fight' and so in Mandy's story there appears to be a weaker understanding of her figured worlds (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001) from the perspective of her work, than in Rebecca's story. In terms of activating her agency, the wider social

contexts of her husband leaving her was a catalyst in activating her agency, which focussed her 'intentionality'. In terms of the need to keep her salary Mandy's options were both structurally constrained and facilitated. On the one hand The School Direct route, allowed her the 'affordance' or 'conducive circumstances' to activate her own agency, on the other the inaccessibility of a PGCE route meant that she remained confined in the same school. The initial lack of support from her workplace could have been a structural inhibitor, however further implementation of her agency here was to seek to prove herself which resulted in 'intentionality, forethought, self-directedness and self-efficacy' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 36). This demonstrates agency as a multi-dimensional construct as considered through an ecological model. In this case, Mandy, like Rebecca, is passing through a series of events that 'provide a progressive increase in developmentally appropriate challenges' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 39) building her self-efficacy. However in Mandy's case these progressive challenges come more from her need to 'prove herself' and the 'demand' to keep a salary. Rather than with Rebecca, who experiences progressive challenges as part of her professional development?

Mandy discusses a long-term plan emerging form her short-term achievements and this aligns with the projective dimension of an ecological model, which is underpinning the development of an 'expanded repertoire' of choices (Priestley et al 2015). Mandy articulates this here:

> So I thought, right, get that out the way. Then I assessed it and said, do the top-up …. travelling, one day a week and, yeah, so, although there was a long term goal, I did just take one step at a time and then look to see where I was at that time.

Mandy was working on her-self and making choices along the way as she came to 'figure out' her new professional self, resulting from circumstances she did not anticipate and Urrietta (2007) explores the 'contingency' of the social spaces we gain entry to. Sometimes a relationship breakdown can be both the result of engagement with new social space and the catalyst that drives your goals and facilitates entry to others. Development of criticality and the ability to deal with these various contingencies is supported by exposure to wider reflective environments that Mandy would have experienced during her HE studies. This may have enabled an 'imaginative distancing' from past responses (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Financial and geographical confines upon Mandy's 'figured worlds', resulted in her staying at the same school for 13 years. Loyalty, alongside a lack of other opportunities within the realms of her locality and finances influenced her intention to act leading, in this instance, to perhaps lower self-efficacy than in Rebecca's story. Within her work experience for School Direct she spent some time in a different school and says 'if there would have been a position there for me, I would definitely have taken it'. A simple version of agency might construct Mandy as constrained by structure unable to activate her agency in the way she most desired, by moving schools. In a more nuanced analysis, Mandy is not a passive victim to structure. Mandy's projections might be seen as more 'narrowly instrumental' (Priestley et al 2015). However, there are many ways to move through powerful times of transition and in Mandy's case her 'preference' or 'demand' to provide for her family, gave 'stability to her response tendencies' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 38) and resulted in her achieving a 'version of success'.

Illustrative case 3: Fiona – beautician and TA – 'still struggling to get on'

model

As with Mandy, Fiona's case study offers some understanding of her figured worlds

(Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001) from the university perspective. There is

a weaker understanding from the perspective of her workplace where she describes

an unsupported, and stalled professional progression demonstrating the power of a

collective institutional structure to de-activate agency. Most significant to Fiona's

illustrative case was the continued difficulty she expressed trying to gain a salaried

School Direct post. This eroded her capacity to professionally progress and author

her biography in the way she wanted and limited her 'intentionality, forethought, self-

directedness and self-efficacy' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 36). Despite

expressing a long-term goal to teach, Fiona presents as the least resilient or

'resource-equipped' actor (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). She seems able to

formulate goals, but less able to maintain them or to practically and evaluatively

transform them into action (Priestley et al 2015).

Fiona is a 51-year-old white British woman with three grown children and she

identifies as non-disabled. She is FIF to attend university. Her father is unknown to

her and her mother was a shop assistant. Fiona was a beautician and then

combined this with a role as a TA, which she started when her children were young.

She then began to study for her FD. She progressed to the BA and graduated with a

2:1. She is continuing to work in the same school and in the same job as a TA.

Unlike the other two cases, Rebecca and Mandy, Fiona had distinct plans from the outset that she wanted to teach, yet she is the illustrative case that has not yet achieved this:

> I want to go into teaching so I started off as a TA. I worked my way up and then couldn't really progress any further without going on and doing a degree…I'm still a TA. I cover a lot of classes. I do PPA three days a week, Year 1, Year 2, Year 6. So in terms of my job, it hasn't really changed a lot.

From the outset, Fiona has the strongest intention to act and therefore perhaps the greatest potential to activate her agency. Fiona attributes her lack of progression as largely due to an inability to secure a funded route to teaching and to a struggle within her professional environment to get the support she needs:

> I applied last year got an interview at a school but was unsuccessful. The current school I'm in, they did try. I did apply for two jobs there, a full-time permanent position with the hope that I could do the school assessment route through but they have withdrawn the course and said I didn't have enough experience.

In Fiona's case the collective institution of educational provision appears to be working against the development of her self-efficacy to activate her agency and she is struggling significantly with 'expectation maintenance' (Priestley et al 2015). Fiona's judgements are practical as, in her view, they are 'shaped by the affordances and constraints of the context' (Priestley et al 2015, 6). She articulates that she is coming up against collective structural constraints in that she cannot secure a School Direct place. When questioned in the interviews about other alternatives to School Direct such as PGCE Fiona reinforced the need to maintain a salary:

> Interviewer: You talked about the fact that you need the salary so you can't go through the PGCE route?
>
> Fiona: No, not al all. No.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think you would have preferred to do the PGCE route or do you think that School Direct route is the better route of the two?
>
> Fiona: It's not so much what I prefer to do. It's more financial costs that I've got to be looking at the salaried route.

Fiona's decision processes are also evaluative as she is clear that the reason she is yet to move into teaching is that she cannot risk losing a salary. For now, Fiona remains in the same occupational position as she was before beginning her studies and in her interview there are distinct elements of disappointment with this, of lower resilience and an inability to gain an 'imaginative distance' or 'loosen from past actions' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Fiona's following statement demonstrates this:

> There's nothing else that is on offer to me at the school I work at where I can progress any further. I mean, like I said, I'm Computer Subject Leader, I'm Deputy Subject Leader for RE and PE and there's just no other openings within the school that I can do now because I'm as far as I can go until I teach.

In terms of Fiona's progression, her workplace could be a catalyst in enabling Fiona to fulfil her potential through initial financial and professional support of a School Direct route. The absence of this is evidence of a structural constraint outweighing the strength of Fiona's desire to progress, or her agency to make this happen. She talks throughout her interview about wanting to make that transition to fully qualified teacher, and she clearly has 'substantial capacity (e.g. skills and knowledge) and strong educational aspirations, innovation may simply prove to be too difficult, or too risky to enact (Priestely et al 2015, 7). The circumstances that Fiona is operating in are not currently presenting 'conducive circumstances' to activate her agency (Priestley 2015, Priestley et al 2015; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017). Fiona is yet to break free of her more ascribed class biography. In weighing up the biographical risks she is, or feels she is, currently structurally unable to leave her job and her wage to pursue the post-graduate qualification she needs to become a teacher:

> So that's my biggest barrier, the funding because last year, the schools, they wouldn't get so much funding from the Government. I think it was cut by half so a lot of schools didn't

carry on with it because I want to do the School Direct salaried route. Because I can't afford to go back to uni to do a PGCE course…I think, even though I would have loved a job at the school, I think the best thing for me, is to leave now and move on.

Fiona could be a direct beneficiary of changes to teacher training that a 'crisis' in teacher recruitment could bring about (Bloom, 2017). If alternative pathways are increased for teacher training then Fiona may either be able to stay at her school and gain a salaried School Direct place or move to another school offering this or an alternative pathway.

Conclusions

Three illustrative cases were chosen for further exploration in this paper because they broadly represent the pattern of professional progression for the whole study population: 'success', 'version of success', and 'still struggling to get on'. These illustrative cases allow a nuanced exploration of intention to act, activation of agency, and impact of structural affordances and constraints. Theories of figured worlds (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001, Urrieta 2007) and an ecological model of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Priestley 2015; Priestley et al 2015; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017) were combined to consider these nuances and the extent to which individuals can activate their agency to facilitate professional progression.

This paper asked the following questions:

1. How did TAs activate their agency during their studies?

2. How were TAs institutionally supported to activate agency?

3. To what extent does activation of agency impact on their professional development?

4. How might TAs be supported to use their agency to contribute a partial solution to the teacher recruitment crisis?

Answering these questions separately is less useful as 'answers' are interlinked to one another, with TAs more effectively activating their agency (question 1) when institutions (question 2) provide conducive circumstances. This increases the potential for the TAs to act with intentionality and forethought to achieve desired professional development (question 3). Recommendations for support (question 4) flow throughout this conclusion and demonstrate why an understanding of agency is important.

The research here demonstrates that for the 'success' model of professional progression illustrative case – Rebecca – there is strong symbiosis between student, FD provider and workplace. This resulted in a supportive learning environment producing 'affordances' and 'conducive circumstances' which brought together the three dimensions of ecological agency and enabled her to have access to an 'expanded repertoire' of choices, and engage in 'expectation maintenance' as a well 'resource-equipped' actor. The success of her transition through university and the education profession also tapped into Rebecca's figured worlds. She transitioned as a fully participating member of the world she was moving into, taking advantage of the cultural resources presented to her and finding 'recognition' and 'entry' into alternative professional social spaces (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001). The FD course that Rebecca enrolled on was designed specifically to run alongside the employment of new support staff. Staff were remunerated at the same level as entry level lecturers giving them a sense of value. She experienced open,

transparent, accessible routes to teaching. They aligned with her needs in providing her the opportunity to work, study and earn a salary. Her under and post-graduate journey joined together seamlessly and all arenas focused on reflective engagement and development of relevant professional skills over a staged period of time. She was enabled along the way to develop an ever 'expansive repertoire' of options, to engage in 'expectation maintenance' and this allowed her to 'interrupt habitual ways of thinking' that no longer served her future actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Pristely et al 2015). The personal support offered was high calibre from staff that understood the unique 'figured worlds' of the students. Rebecca was gradually supported through 'progressive increases in developmentally appropriate challenges' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 39). This supported development of her 'intentionality, forethought, self-directedness and self-efficacy' (ibid, 36) facilitated successful activation of agency. Though Rebecca's case does not take place in a school, this is an example of the kind of seamless transition that could become part of school led provision. It is also an example of the way in which a collective institution, in this case educational provision, can work to enhance structural drivers so that individuals can be in a better position to activate agency and make facilitating choices through 'affordances' and 'conducive circumstances'.

Mandy is the illustrative case model representing a 'version of success'. She achieved professional progression with what she describes as a struggle with her employers but which came out of necessity or 'demand' within a pivotal episode in her life. This led to decisions that had to be made for the sake of herself and her children. Having to negotiate more complex relational settings resulted in heightened criticality, communication, negotiation and compromise for Mandy and, perhaps, a

'narrowly instrumental' (Priestley et al 2015) 'version of success'. However the support from her school throughout her journey was much less responsive than in Rebecca's case and her story is one of, often, 'periphery' involvement in social spaces and less access to 'cultural resources' (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001). Mandy's drive to 'prove herself' and 'demands' of her family provided the 'stability to her response tendencies' (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017, 38) and allowed her to reach her goal of teacher.

Fiona represents the illustrative case model of 'still struggling to get on' and describes herself as excluded from opportunities she needs to activate her agency. Fiona is operating within a system of structural and self-closure. She expresses feelings of having low access to 'cultural resources' within the social spaces she is trying to enter (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2001). Out of the three cases, she represents experience of the least 'conducive circumstances' within the structures of her school and in her attempts to utilise post-graduate training pathways to teaching. This is severely constraining her capacity and intentionality to act and eroding her self-efficacy (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2017).

Priestley et al (2015, 7) make a good case for why agency is useful in understanding the journeys of these women and their potential as an untapped resource for the teaching recruitment crisis:

> A key implication is that, if agency is achieved rather than being solely about the capacity of actors, then the importance of context should be taken more seriously by public policymakers and leaders in public organisations, as such contexts may serve to disable individuals with otherwise high agentic capacity.

If agency is understood as only residing in individuals then there is less emphasis upon policy makers to examine the constraining factors of policy. If agency is

understood as an inter-relationship between cultural, structural and material factors then policy (local and national) becomes part of the equation to facilitate change and activate agency. All three illustrative cases have authored changes in their ascribed biographies. Even Fiona, at the end of the interview, does not present herself as a finished article. Rather a work in progress still considering ways to improvise and innovate and to use her agency to change the script of her life. By gaining a further understanding of the patterns, which enable and constrain these women to professionally progress, provision in the university and the workplace can respond in a more tailored manner. The research here identifies structural constraints such as difficulty in finding suitable post-graduate training routes. These can erode intention to act and activation of agency over time. TAs could be part of the solution to the developing teacher shortage identified in policy response (National Audit Office 2016; Worth et al. 2017). To enable this there is a need for open, transparent and accessible under and post graduate routes into teaching which align with professional and personal lives of these women. Funded pathways, or pathways that can allow participants to work (earn) and learn are paramount as are pathways that recognise many of these learners may have significant geographical constraints due to family and other personal circumstances. Environments, which seek to foster reflective capacity and resilience in the face of change, are also key to build criticality and forward thinking goal orientation and planning which is able to cope with dynamic lives. The key to activation of TA agency does not just lie in TA capacity. In line with Priestley et al (2015, 7) this paper supports that it is at the intersections of cultural, structural and material factors that positive agentic change can occur; exploring both what the TAs ''bring' to the situation and what the situation 'brings'' to them is key. A more holistic and ecological understanding of agency that has

knowledge of the figured worlds of these women, may interrupt habitual ways of thinking and risk aversion leading to expansive future projections, and expectation maintenance. This may lead to more TAs achieving their professional goals of becoming teachers or other educational professionals and at the same time contribute a partial solution to the teacher recruitment crisis within the UK.

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